

ZABDIEL BOYLSTON (1679-1766)

REMARKS AT HIS GRAVE

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HENRY R. VIETS

We, members of the American Association of the History of Medicine, pause here in the old Brookline cemetery at the place where Zabdiel Boylston was buried in 1766. He, the first in the British colony of Massachusetts Bay to use direct inoculation of smallpox matter as a means of preventing a more serious form of the disease, on June 26, 1721, was the leading physician of Brookline, then a small community known as Muddy River. The village, adjacent to Boston, was named after the little stream that runs near by, a brook that ultimately passes the Boston Medical Library, where we have just met, on its way to the Charles.

Smallpox struck a savage blow to Boston and its vicinity in the spring of 1721. The few physicians were helpless in the face of an epidemic of a frequently fatal disease. Only the learned divine, Cotton Mather, seems to have known of the practice of preventing smallpox by direct inoculation. This knowledge came to him from a slave, Onesimus, presented to him by his parishioners in 1706, who had been inoculated in Africa as a member of the Garamantes tribe and thus was immune to smallpox. This direct evidence was reinforced by Mather's reading of the *Transactions of the Royal Society*, a publication he received as a member. In an issue he found an account of inoculation as practiced in Turkey and later strongly advocated by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife of the British ambassador in Constantinople. Mather's keen scientific mind was aroused and, convinced of the value of inoculation, he urged its use in Boston, in a public "Address," dated June 6, 1721. His communication was ignored by public and physicians alike. Again Mather spoke, this time in a "Letter," written on June 24, to the forty-two year old Boylston, a home-spun doctor, self educated and without a medical degree.

Boylston's hour had come. Two days later, he inoculated his son,

* This address was delivered on the occasion of the twenty-third annual meeting of the American Association of the History of Medicine by its president.—ED.



Thomas, and his two negro slaves. Success followed quickly; soon the country doctor, in spite of much opposition, extended his observations and his list of favorable cases grew into scores. He published his report within a couple of years; an orderly, concise and convincing account. Called to London, Boylston was honored by being made a Fellow of the Royal Society, under the presidency of Sir Isaac Newton, on July 7, 1726.

Inoculation by the direct method, its value fully demonstrated in Boston by Boylston, soon spread throughout the world. Immunity was thus established, preventing smallpox in its most terrifying form. This procedure lasted until inoculation was supplanted by Jennerian cowpox vaccination in 1798.

We stand here, almost opposite Harvey Cushing's old house, now demolished, and read with reverence, the faded inscription on the flat tombstone:

Sacred to the memory of Zabdiel Boylston Esq
Physician and F. R. S. who first introduced
the practice of Innoculation into America
Thr'o a Life of extensive Beneficence He was
always faithful to his word, just in his Dealings
affable in his manners and after a long
Sickness in which he was exemplary for his Patience
and Resignation to his maker he quitted this
mortal Life in a just expectation of a happy
Immortality, on the First day of March
A. D. 1766. Aetat 87
With him lies here buried Jerusha his wife
Who died the Fifteenth day of April
A. D. 1764. Aetat 85.

How could one wish for more in life than is implied by the simple words we read today, one hundred and eighty four years after Boylston's death. He was "always faithful to his word, just in his dealings, affable in his manners and . . . exemplary for his patience." Sound principles for young doctors; good guides for historians. But Boylston was more than "a good doctor," for he, as did his later neighbor, Harvey Cushing, had the instinct of genius, grasping the "unknown" and making it known, serviceable, and beneficial to his fellow men.

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